

# CLASS COPY ↓

## ASSEMBLY INFORMATION SHEET -1

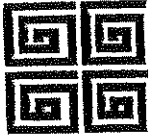
### Introduction

In this phase of GREEKS you will be asked to participate in debate before fellow Hellenes in the Assembly, a democratic body present in most Greek city-states. For most of Greek history this Assembly, or *Ekklesia*, made the important decisions as Athens and other city-states became more democratic. To participate in debate in the Assembly was a privilege for free-born Athenian males. As many as 40,000 took part, yet records indicate daily meetings were attended by maybe 4,000 to 5,000. Many Greeks could not take part. Foreign-born people, women, and slaves were not entitled to full citizenship. Only a special vote by the Assembly could change this rule. And all rules, laws, and propositions came from this legislative body.

### The role of the Boule, the Council of 500

Before the Assembly considered a bill or proposition, all such prospective items had to be submitted to a Council of 500, or the Boule, for preliminary examination. The Boule, in a sense, was above the Assembly in dignity but not in actual power. Under Pericles in the Golden Age, the Boule was in effect a committee of the Assembly, much like Great Britain's House of Lords or the United States' Senate. Members of the Boule were chosen by lot, 50 from each of the 10 tribes. They served for one year and received five obols a day. All eligible citizens could belong to the Boule for one term, and unless every one in the polis had already served, no one ever was reelected. To perform tasks, the Boule divided itself into 10 subcommittees of 50 members each. These separate subcommittees presided over the Council and the Assembly for a month of 36 days. When the Boule met as a whole, it had several functions: it supervised the conduct of members and city officials, it controlled foreign affairs of the polis, and it often issued executive decrees. The particular subcommittee which assumed leadership in the Assembly chose one to preside over the larger *Ekklesia*. Thus, for one given day in the Assembly, the presiding officer was often a common, ordinary citizen whose name was chosen at random. His responsibility included preparing the Assembly's agenda and formulating final conclusions reached in the legislative body each day.





## ASSEMBLY INFORMATION SHEET - 2

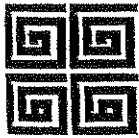
### The Pnyx

It must have excited Greeks shopping in the agora early in the morning to see bright flags hoisted up on a tall flagpole in the nearby Pnyx. They signaled to all citizens that it was time to leave the agora, palaestra, and gymnasium to rush down to the semicircular area of the Pnyx. No one wanted to be tardy, for a long rope sprinkled with a red chalk netted the late citizens and marked them. Later they would have to forfeit their three obol fee or perhaps pay a fine. At the entrance to the Pnyx, lexiarchs took roll. Once in, wicker hurdles closed off the entrance, and the Assembly was ready for one of its 40 yearly meetings. A crowd of maybe 4,000 to 6,000, sitting on their haunches or kneeling, awaited the start. A long ledge of rock formed a kind of stage in front with a crude pulpit called a *bema* focused attention. In front of the bema stood a small portable altar for the traditional sacrifice of a pig before each session. Behind the bema lay a few wooden boards where 50 subcommittee members guided the proceedings. One long chair near the bema was for the presiding officer. In the 215' x 400' Pnyx there was no roof, just a clear sky. To the right of the area stood the Acropolis with its beautiful buildings. Not surprising, the acoustics of the Pnyx were excellent.

### The Assembly in action

Once the pig was sacrificed, the proceeding began. The officer said, "Resolved, by the Boule, that . . . ." The herald then announced, "Who wishes to speak?" Usually the mover of the measure, already approved for debate, stepped forward and spoke to his issue. Each speaker was given a myrtle wreath to wear as he spoke. Speakers who followed the first came forward by age, the oldest to the youngest. No one was allowed to speak twice. And no one could speak if he owed the city taxes, was not a landholder, was not legally married, had not offended public morals, had not evaded military service, or had not thrown away his shield in battle. In actuality, only those not disqualified from these restrictions and who were also trained orators addressed the Assembly on most days. In any case, a water clock limited their remarks so everyone could be heard.

The Assembly crowd was a difficult one to impress. It laughed at any speaker's awkwardness or mispronunciations; it hated hearing any speaker going off the topic; it whistled and clapped loudly to force the speaker from the bema. On some days, it resembled a mob. Yet, it could be swayed easily. On positive points made by an effective orator, the crowd might shout, "Euge! Euge!" (meaning bravo).



## ASSEMBLY INFORMATION SHEET - 3



When all speakers had been heard and the subcommittee had not adjourned the meeting early for unruliness, a vote was called. If some didn't want a vote to occur, they yelled, "I hear thunder," or "Zeus is upset, look at the sky," or "No vote, no vote." Others called for the vote. Usually a show of hands was enough (yes or no) to indicate support or nonsupport for the bill or proposition. The final tally either confirmed, amended, or overrode the Boule's report on the issue. Whatever the decision, the Assembly's action was final.

If after a full year the consequences of one particular bill were considered evil, calamitous, or just plain bad for the citizens, the original mover of the bill or proposition was fined, disfranchised (lost his vote for a time), or, in some cases, put to death. In such ways, hasty lawmaking was discouraged.